



EDITORIAL

Protecting Public Lands and Public Health

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Our public lands are essential to the health and well-being of our communities. Ohio has 1.1 million acres of federal and state recreation lands, including Cuyahoga Valley National Park, Wayne National Forest, and our award-winning state parks.^{1,2} Numerous county and city park systems also offer access to nature, educational activities, and programs for residents of all ages. Connecting many of these public lands is the Buckeye Trail. At nearly 1447 miles in length, it loops around the state and is on its way to being designated a National Scenic Trail. If advocates are successful, the Buckeye Trail will join 10 other trails, including the Appalachian Trail, the North Country Trail, and the Pacific Crest Trail, with the unique distinction of being the only loop trail among them. From well-known landmarks such as Old Man's Cave to the shores of Lake Erie to your neighbor's favorite spot for bird-watching, these public lands offer space for all Ohioans to relax, play, and connect.

Spending time in nature is good for our health. Exposure to nature is linked to improved mental health, sleep, blood pressure, and increased physical activity.³ The number of Americans getting outdoors to recreate has been growing over the past decade, with outdoor participation rates in 2024 at 58.6%, their highest.⁴ People enjoy the outdoors in many ways that include hiking, walking, Frisbee golfing, hunting, boating, skiing, fishing, rock climbing, geocaching, archery, photography, cycling, and, even, just good old-fashioned relaxing. There is truly something out there for everyone. Our public lands provide opportunities for people to get outside and engage in activities that improve their mental health, physical health, and quality of life.

Public lands also provide great opportunities for us, as public health professionals, to connect with our communities, develop programs, research their impact, and advocate for their protection. While the number of individuals recreating outdoors is growing, our public lands and parks are not fully accessible to all. Collecting data on access to public lands can help us better understand how existing spaces can be used and where we need to increase green space and access to the outdoors. We can work in partnership with local, state, and federal agencies, as well as nonprofits and private companies, toward developing programs that help people get outside. We can implement programs that encourage people to use our public lands, improve access to transportation to parks, create more green spaces in urban areas, and make parks more accessible for people with disabilities. As public health professionals, we can also continue to build research to understand how nature impacts health and how the use of public lands can impact surrounding communities.

There has long been a tension between using our public lands for recreation and conservation and industries that extract from them lumber, oil, gas, and minerals. This occurs regularly in both our state and federal governments. The outdoor recreation industry represents 2.3% of the national gross domestic product (GDP), well in excess of oil, gas, and mining combined.⁵ In Ohio, it makes up 2.2% of our GDP.⁵ Our public lands add value to our lives and economy, beyond resource extraction. As public health professionals and citizens, we must stay informed about policy changes as they come forward. Earlier this year, fracking began at Salt Fork State Park following a 2022 revision to Ohio law.⁶ More recently, an executive order from the White House and a follow-up memo from the US Department of Agriculture opened Wayne National Forest to extensive logging. There are concerns that this federal policy change does not consider the local context of forest management and is unnecessarily aggressive in its plan to log national forest land across the United States. Overlogging in Wayne National Forest will negatively impact recreation, water quality, and wildlife and leave surrounding communities vulnerable to wildfires and flooding.⁷ As public health experts, we can keep our elected officials informed about the health benefits of our public lands and help to develop policies that reflect good stewardship of our natural resources and a good quality of life for Ohioans. We can share our stories of experiences on public lands and what it means to us personally and for our communities. So, get out there, take a hike, jump in a lake, get some fresh air, or touch grass for your own health and for public health.





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